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MARTIN M. LINTNER (President of ESCT)

KARIM SCHELKENS (General Secretary of ESCT)

The Conversation of the Presidium of the European Society of Catholic Theology with Representatives from the Roman Curia¹, 26 September 2014

Introduction

On 26 September 2014 a meeting was held, in Rome, between:

- the members of the presidium of the ESCT – EUROPEAN SOCIETY FOR CATHOLIC THEOLOGY: Martin M. Lintner (President), Pierre Van Hecke (Vice-president), Katica Knezović, Piotr Morciniec, Karim Schelkens (General Secretary), Gerhard Kruip (Editor in chief of ET-Studies) [present for all items on the agenda];
- the president of the KATHOLISCH-THEOLOGISCHER FAKULTÄTENTAG, Germany: Alfons Knoll [at the invitation of the ESCT; present for all items on the agenda];
- the secretary of the CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH (CDF): S.E. Luis Ladaria [present for items 1, 2, and 3];
- representatives from the CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION (CCE): Friedrich Bechina (Under Secretary) and Rafael Rieger [present for all items on the agenda];
- the representative from the CONGREGATION FOR THE BISHOPS: André Ciszewski [present for item 4].

The general purpose of this gathering was to discuss the procedures regarding the granting of the *nihil obstat* to professors in theology and the regulations for doctrinal examinations. The occasion was important since it allowed an open dialogue between the magisterium and theologians representing various regions in Europe and various theological schools and backgrounds. All of this occurred in the context of a shared sentiment of praise for the Apostolic Letter *Evangelii*

¹ The present report has been drafted by Martin M. Lintner and Karim Schelkens and has been read by Fr. Friedrich Bechina, on behalf of the CCE.

gaudium, in which Pope Francis has underlined both that contemporary theology should be present in universities, that it should be committed to the practice of the faith and that theologians can rightfully take into account the conciliar idea of the hierarchy of truths.

The meeting began with a general introduction to the history and background of the EUROPEAN SOCIETY FOR CATHOLIC THEOLOGY. It was explained how the Society arose out of a common ideal of European integration after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and was set up as an international and interdisciplinary organisation offering service to theologians in Eastern, Central and Western Europe. By the end of the 1990s a dialogue between the European Society and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was launched. In this same period, in 1998, the ESCT was involved in the establishment of a worldwide Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT), which today has thirteen member organisations and various affiliated groups and institutions. The general aim is to help connect Catholic theologians and to offer a forum for exchange and representation. From this perspective, the ongoing dialogue with the magisterium of the Catholic Church is regarded as an important means of building and maintaining relationships between the local theologians who teach and carry out research and the voice of the universal magisterium.

1. The *Nihil Obstat*

The main topic of the meeting in September 2014 was that of the *nihil obstat* procedures. During the conversation, concerns were expressed by each side. The CDF underlined that, in reality, only a small number of the many demands for a *nihil obstat* that are put forward are the object of real discussion. It was explained that, from the perspective of Rome, there are three types of dossier: first, it may be that there are differences of understanding between local ordinaries and their faculties. Given the principle of subsidiarity, such cases are not the direct concern of the Roman Curia. Second, there are dossiers that are incomplete and require only the completion of the documentation. These are often resolved through a simple request for information. Finally, some dossiers require further investigation from the side of the competent offices. These dossiers are rare and, over the past few years, it has become clear that problems hardly ever arise at the level of theological debate but lie rather in the field of discipline.

At the level of content and theological scrutiny, there are three areas where problems may occur: debates on the uniqueness of Christ, on the sacrament of marriage, and on gender-related issues (e.g. the ordination of women). During our conversation it was clear that in such problematic dossiers the criteria for

judgment always lie in the respect shown for the official doctrines of the Catholic magisterium. It was deemed important that, in their writings, theologians should clearly indicate their awareness of Catholic doctrine and indicate when they are also entering into further debate. On behalf of theologians, the representatives of the European Society underlined the need for further clarification by the magisterium of the notion of “consensus” and to indicate how much academic leeway there is for a critical confrontation with the doctrine of the magisterium. Not every critical confrontation should be judged as disagreement.

2. Academic Theology

All partners in the conversations agreed that contemporary theology is a complex and diverse field, and that different regions have their own schools and traditions. This diversity was praised as a sign of catholicity, which is encouraged by Pope Francis. Some other points of concern were addressed. The first point was the role and position of Catholic theology in the European academic landscape, where research on religion tends to be reduced to religious studies. Both parties agreed to the importance of safeguarding theology as an academic discipline, but they also expressed a clear appreciation for the collaboration between theology and religious studies as disciplines that may help the development of theology (e.g. philosophy, sociology, psychology of religion, social anthropology). The distinction remains important, however: the presence of theology in state universities is considered to be a valuable way of making the church present in society, and of benefit to theology itself, since it offers opportunities for dialogue with contemporary society. At this juncture, it seems important that only those who hold a doctoral degree in theology and who teach in this area in a lifelong academic position should be required to meet the standards for obtaining a Roman *nihil obstat*. It was observed by the CDF and CCE that an important prerequisite for obtaining the Roman *nihil obstat* is a “canonical” or “ecclesiastical” academic degree. The ESCT expressed the conviction that the path towards an application for a chair in theology should be transparent.

Another point of concern is the role of the laity in theological education, especially the role of female theologians. It was observed that intellectual and pastoral quality are crucial in the appointment of professors in theology, for priests as well as for lay people. In some cases, tensions have existed between faculties and local ordinaries on the number of ordained ministers among faculty staff. Much is dependent on regional traditions in this regard. It is important to note, however, that there are quite a number of countries in which canon law, based on agreements in concordats, supersedes national legislation. In the majority of European countries, national legislation does not touch on matters

considered to fall under the internal organisation of religions, including the academic study of theology. Representatives of the CDF and CCE reminded us that, at least in the case of the intellectual formation of priests, the *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis* (1970 and 1985) applies the general rule that “professors for the sacred subjects ought to be priests” (cf. n. 33). This regulation is still valid and has never been revised.

Two thoughts were expressly underlined: bishops who wish to increase the number of priests holding academic chairs should be urged to stimulate the intellectual formation of their clergy and to allow them to study at an academic level. On lay theologians, it was noted that there are equal opportunity policies in academic institutions that respect the needs of the laity, which is important for improving a culture of communication within the church and theology.

3. Dialogue and Procedures

One important suggestion at the gathering was the shared insight that the evaluation of the work and writings of theologians should be written in accessible, pastoral language. A language that supports them and allows for further dialogue. Language that values unity in diversity and the shared sentiment that all members of the church benefit from communion among the baptized. This would improve relations between theologians and representatives from the magisterium and takes account of the reality that those who need a Roman *nihil obstat* are often young theologians, who require time to grow and develop in theological insight. The representatives of the ESCT stressed that the language in which church doctrine is expressed is developing also and needs to be interpreted in the light of the “signs of the times”. It is very important, therefore, for the church to grant theologians the liberty to discuss theological questions openly and to put forward new proposals. Whether these proposals are compatible with the doctrine of the church should first be discussed in the academic community of theologians. Furthermore, we touched upon the fact that in the evaluation of theological writings the argument of silence (that is, judging an author by what he/she does not say) is not a valuable criterion for judging orthodoxy, nor is a simple comparison with the Roman Catechism sufficient for a nuanced judgment of a theologian’s statements. In those cases where theologians have been asked to write an article, it was said that this would happen in a respectful way, so as not to discredit the theologian in question. Last but not least the whole procedure should not last too long. The rules that have already been developed in agreement with the CCE for German speaking countries could be a good example for the periods of time that are allowed for the different stages of the procedure.

4. Bishops

During the meeting, it was said that dialogue is needed on several levels: between theologians and their local bishops, between local ordinaries and Rome, and between Rome and theologians. It was underlined all would benefit from stimulating such processes of communication in an atmosphere of honesty and freedom from anxiety.

Among the means that may help to improve communication, the idea of a *vademecum* on the *nihil obstat* procedures was suggested. Such a guide might help to clarify the procedures and the different options for bishops, faculty deans and individual theologians, and might also prevent future tensions.

This *vademecum* and the procedures concerning *nihil obstat* should also be a theme for the courses given to new bishops beginning their office. It was suggested that local/national Doctrinal Commissions might play a valuable role here.

It was clear during the meeting that the Roman Congregations are engaged in the process of guaranteeing the quality of theological research and education. It would be of great value if this process of safeguarding quality be organized in dialogue with those in the field of theology.